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Compliments, Insults, and the Paradox of Pillow Talk

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Compliments, Insults, and the Paradox of Pillow Talk

Abstract

I haven't been a skinny girl since I was seven years old.

At nine, I was told I wasn't small enough to sit down and talk to the other girls. I didn't "fit" and they wouldn't make enough space for my body, or for my big opinions. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, body image, feminist

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

COMPLIMENTS, INSULTS AND THE PARADOX OF PILLOW TALK

September 29, 2014

I haven't been a skinny girl since I was seven years old.

At nine, I was told I wasn't small enough to sit down and talk to the other girls. I didn't "fit" and they wouldn't make enough space for my body, or for my big opinions.

In the fifth grade, I was chased around the yard by my friends yelling, "hey chub!"

In the ninth grade, a boy asked me out as a joke; it's hilarious making fun of the girl who couldn't ever be asked out seriously. Then, I went to India on vacation, all the other teenagers stared at me and told me I looked 'American sized'. But I hadn't ever lived in America. All I knew was that Americans were good at taking up space.

I turned to books; specifically, Tamora Pierce's [Tortall series](#). Her heroines, female knights who rebelled against society, found strength and self-worth from within themselves, separate from their physical appearances. They taught me that I didn't need to be skinny to be intelligent. Unlike the smart, conventionally attractive women in popular culture, I didn't need to have a gap between my thighs to have dreams. I didn't need a certain body type to chase after those dreams. I didn't need to leave behind more negative space when I moved. The human body is just a vessel for the mind, and I believed that.

I wanted to believe that.

These body positive ideals helped me to balance the negative words, actions and looks that were directed at me. In high school, we discussed the impact of the media. I was vocal in class, explaining how patriarchal values made it so hard for women to be valued without being conventionally beautiful, that



women were valued only for how they looked or some accomplishment paired with how they looked, and that the propagated body hate needed to end.

Despite my feminist beliefs, I continued to be affected by how I thought others perceived my body – how I perceived my body. After school, I made myself throw up after lunch every day. While we flipped through magazines for perfection, I skipped dinners to bring my bones to the surface, trying to “fit in” to the idea of beauty.

In high school, my PE teacher asked if I was pigeon toed. I was not, I am not. I had just walked that way for years so that my thighs wouldn't scrape one another as much when I walked, so I'd have a little bit of the moving space that the other girls (and most boys) had with their thigh gaps.

I would tell myself that I didn't care about beauty, but during senior year I lost six pounds in five days and walked through school feeling light-headed all week. I came home at one and worked out before passing out in bed at five pm every day. On the sixth day, I still felt ugly.

Coming to college, being exposed to new people and new ideas helped me start to regain the body positivity I had lost. But, it was my first college hookup that really brought that about. As anti-feminist as it seems, being pressed up against a wall with a then-stranger whispering into my ear that I was “sexy as fuck” helped me start to think that I was indeed, more attractive than I had believed.

At first I felt guilty admitting this. Just like I wanted to deny that comments and media influenced how I thought of myself, I also wanted to reject the idea that compliments from a man made me feel beautiful. Women should be independent beings, unaffected by the outside world, right?

While this message of self-empowerment and self-reliance is something I believe in, the truth is that it can be difficult to practice. We are always at the hands of the outside world. No matter how hard we try, it's nearly impossible to be numb to every negative influence we encounter. If I could be led to believe that my body was ugly because of other people, I could believe that I am beautiful because of them too.

A few months ago, I told my roommate that I had never felt comfortable in shorts, because my legs are covered in marks: scars from falling over, shaving nicks, cellulite, stretch marks, and old mosquito bites. She threw a pair of her own at me, demanding I try them on. I didn't feel comfortable, but wore them anyway. I've still been wearing them. I hope you've seen me in them.

Then, in the middle of having sex a month ago, I heard a breathed out “those hips though” as a kiss was pressed to my waist. I'm not entirely sure the admission was made for me to hear, but it was enough to make me laugh, and it's enough to make me think that perhaps my body is a little more beautiful than I thought.

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